

# **Expert Testimony\_Senate Bill 0117 - Jennifer D. Ro**

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Position: FAV



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
*Department of Kinesiology*

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**TO:** The Maryland General Assembly  
Senate Finance Committee  
Annapolis, Maryland

**FROM:** Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH  
Associate Professor, Department of Kinesiology  
Director, Public Health Outcomes and Effects of the Built Environment Laboratory  
School of Public Health, University of Maryland College Park

**DATE:** February 1, 2023

**RE:** Support Senate Bill 0117

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, Senator Ellis, and members of the Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 0117. I am here as an Associate Professor of Kinesiology and Director of the Public Health Outcomes and Effects of the Built Environment Laboratory at the School of Public Health, University of Maryland in College Park. This important legislation will require the "State Highway Administration to collect litter and mow the grass along State highways and certain interstate highways on a consistent and regular basis". Subsequently, Senate Bill 0117 will be considered a supplemental environmental project relating to maintenance along State and interstate highways.

Before I share with you why it is vitally important to support Senate Bill 0117, I will tell you briefly about my background. My work and research examines the impact of built, social, and natural environments, including the institutional and structural inequities of these environments, on the public health outcomes of marginalized communities. More specifically, I examine the dynamic relationship of these environments with physical activity, whether that be leisurely exercise or active transit, like walking or biking, in order to understand complex health outcome patterns, including disparities in the prevalence in obesity or diabetes, among adults and children.

More than 55 years ago, as a pet project of First Lady Bird Johnson, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Highway Beautification Act. This act encouraged scenic enhancement by providing funding for cleanup and greenspace landscaping along the roadways, however, the first lady believed that beauty had a real social utility. She was quoted as saying "the subject of beautification is like a tangled skein of wool. All the threads are interwoven—recreation and pollution, and mental health, and the crime rate, and rapid transit...and parks... everything leads to something else."

While First Lady Johnson spoke of the interwoven threads of pollution, health and crime, my work as well as the work of others have identified and documented these significant associations through research findings. My research on the relationship between built or man-made environments and physical activity among children living throughout the Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC region found that when there was not a lot of litter on the streets, children were

more than three times likely to play at least one hour a day outside. And this level of physical activity has not only been recommended as the minimum level needed for children by the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, but it translates to numerous positive health outcomes, such as a lower risk of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, depression, cancer, and many more. In addition, adult physical activity research also has revealed that the absence of litter, vandalism and crime and was associated with higher rates of walkability and physical activity and lower rates of obesity.

Other research has also shown how neighborhood disorder, such as the presence of litter, overgrown grass and dense brush, can negatively impact community health. In a group of studies known as The Florida Litter Study, litter has been identified as a major indicator of neighborhood decline and disorder, which ultimately decreased property values and increased crime. Aside from the undeniable issue of aesthetics, litter can cause human health problems by attracting rats or other pests that may carry disease, as well as, wildlife health problems by degrading aquatic and avian habitats. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that un-mowed grasses are associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress for nearby residents. And overgrown grasses along with dense brush have been shown to provide obscure spots and spaces for criminal and illicit activities, including illegal dumping.

Many people don't recognize that the roads we walk and drive on are owned and maintained by the State. I live in Ten Hills, Baltimore, but just a few miles east on Route 40 (Edmondson Avenue) the poverty rate is more than double the rate of Ten Hills. High concentrations of neighborhood disorder are routinely located in poor communities of color and/or socially disadvantaged neighborhoods with marginalized populations. Because I travel Route 40 on a regular basis, I notice how the litter piles up and the grass overgrows due to a lack of timely trash collection and grass mowing east of my Ten Hills neighborhood.

Health disparities exist throughout Maryland. To name a few, there are race-based obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease disparities whereby Black Maryland residents are one in a half to twice as likely to have been diagnosed with these conditions in comparison to White Maryland residents. There is a growing body of literature supporting the argument that well-maintained areas help reduce health disparities by providing safe and activity promoting areas. These areas can also be restorative natural settings to improve psychological well-being for its residents. Therefore, I fully support Senate Bill 0117.

This bill addresses more than just the eyesore of our unkept roads. Senate Bill 0117 will establish the administrative infrastructure needed to promote health and wellness for Maryland residents by upholding and monitoring the maintenance of our State and interstate highways.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jennifer D. Roberts". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH

**MD Catholic Conference\_FAV\_SB0117.pdf**

Uploaded by: MJ Kraska

Position: FAV



MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

February 01, 2023

**SB 117**

**State Highway Administration - Litter Collection and Mowing**

**Senate Finance Committee**

**Position: Support**

The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

Senate Bill 117 would require the State Highway Administration (SHA), consistently and regularly, to collect litter and mow the grass along State highways and interstate highways it is responsible for maintaining. The bill establishes minimum frequency requirements for litter collection and mowing, depending on the season. SHA must contract with a Maryland-based company to collect litter and provide mowing services, as specified. Litter collection and mowing services provided under the bill must be considered a supplemental environmental project (SEP) for purposes of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) SEP policy.

The Conference supports legislation that recognizes the integral ecosystem in which we live. In his encyclical, *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si')*, Pope Francis states that *"There is a growing sensitivity to the environment and the need to protect nature, along with a growing concern, both genuine and distressing, for what is happening to our planet... Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."* Making sure that our state highways and interstates are clean is just one way we can make sure to care for our common home.

The Conference appreciates your consideration and, for these reasons, respectfully requests a **favorable** report on Senate Bill 117.



# **Sponsor Testimony**

Uploaded by: Senator Ellis

Position: FAV

## SENATE BILL 117

# State Highway Administration - Litter Collection and Mowing



# Purpose of SB 117

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- The purpose of this bill is to require the State Highway Administration to collect litter and mow the grass along State highways and certain interstate highways with a certain frequency.
- It also requires the Administration to contract with a certain company to collect litter and provide mowing services under the Act.
- Additionally, it specifies that the provision of litter collection and mowing services under the Act be considered a supplemental environmental project for certain purposes.



# Duties of the State Highway Administration:

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- Collect litter and mow at least twice a month during the growing season.
- Collect litter and mow at least twice a month outside the growing season, weather permitting.
- If mowing will occur, collect litter before mowing.

# The Administration Must Also:

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- Contract with a Maryland-Based company to collect litter and provide mowing services under this section.
- When awarding a contract, the administration must give preference to:
  - Companies based within the county in which the litter collection and mowing will occur; and
  - Companies that hire formerly incarcerated individuals.

# TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN MARYLAND



MALLOES BAY



BALTIMORE HARBOR



OCEAN CITY

# Why is SB 117 Important?

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- According to the Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration, **“Keeping our roadways free from litter and debris improves the health of our environment. It enhances the experience of driving in Maryland - for both residents and visitors.”**
- Highway trash may also **pose a hazard to traffic**. Cleaning roadways can aid in the safety of citizens’ travel.

# Works Cited

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- Text from Senate Bill 117
- <https://wgme.com/news/local/an-inside-look-at-roadside-litter-in-maine>
- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seal\\_of\\_Charles\\_County,\\_Maryland.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seal_of_Charles_County,_Maryland.svg)
- [https://dailyjournalonline.com/news/local/modot-has-started-mowing-in-st-francois-county/article\\_87442f9c-abb0-5489-9e47-b6c8c42cbdec.html](https://dailyjournalonline.com/news/local/modot-has-started-mowing-in-st-francois-county/article_87442f9c-abb0-5489-9e47-b6c8c42cbdec.html)
- [Chapter 26. Changing the Physical and Social Environment | Section 10. Establishing Neighborhood Beautification Programs | Main Section | Community Tool Box \(ku.edu\)](#)

**SB117\_AFSCME3\_FWA.pdf**

Uploaded by: Denise Gilmore

Position: FWA



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Patrick Moran - President

**SB 117 - State Highway Administration - Litter Collection and Mowing  
POSITION: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS**

AFSCME Council 3 supports SB 117. This legislation requires the State Highway Administration (SHA) to collect litter and mow grass regularly and consistently along the State highways the agency is responsible for maintaining. At one time, state employees performed all this work. Over the years however, staffing has become so reduced that SHA began to rely increasingly on contractors to do this work which has led to disappointing results, less oversight, and cost inefficiencies. In March 2022, the Office of Legislative Audits published the results of a fiscal compliance audit for the agency and reported that,

*“SHA did not publish certain contract awards on eMaryland Marketplace Advantage (eMMA) as required, including 3,114 snow removal contracts totaling \$316.4 million. Furthermore, SHA did not adequately safeguard vendor proposals submitted electronically for certain ongoing procurements expected to result in awards for an estimated 66 contracts for architectural and engineering services totaling \$411.8 million. In addition, certain SHA employees may have potentially violated State ethics laws by having relationships with certain contractors and SHA did not take permissible disciplinary actions against certain of these related contractors when their performance was determined to be unsatisfactory.”*

SHA will certainly work to correct these issues, but they can be avoided by hiring more state employees to perform functions that do not need to be contracted out. SB 117 provides the perfect opportunity for this, as state employees were once performing these functions as part of their regularly assigned duties when they had enough staff to do so.

**We recommend SB 117 be amended to reflect the following:**

*On pg. 2 of the bill:*

Cut all of subsection (b) and replace it with, **“The Administration shall hire any additional staff necessary to carry out the provisions of this section.”**

We request a favorable report on SB 117 with this amendment. Thank you.

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# **SB0117 - SHA - Litter Collection and Mowing - OPP\_**

Uploaded by: Patricia Westervelt

Position: UNF

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February 1, 2023

The Honorable Melony Griffith  
Chair, Senate Finance Committee  
3 East, Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

***RE: Letter of Opposition – SB 117 – State Highway Administration – Litter Collection and Mowing***

Dear Chair Griffith and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) respectfully opposes Senate Bill 117, which prescribes the MDOT State Highway Administration (SHA) to follow a specific litter collection and mowing schedule.

The SHA regards turf grass management and litter removal as a vital maintenance activity that requires thoughtful planning, scheduling, and supervision to achieve a safe, functional, sustainable, and attractive highway system. The SHA's Turfgrass Management Guidelines are designed to balance environmental stewardship with drainage system preservation, highway safety, and roadside aesthetics.

Currently, the SHA removes litter from State-owned roadways on a monthly cycle, costing an annual average of \$8 million. Mowing services, which are completed on a 4 – 6 week cycle during the growing season, cost an annual average of \$12.3 million. Senate Bill 117 would require the SHA to increase the current litter removal and mowing schedule to twice a month, doubling annual expenditures to approximately \$16.6 million and approximately \$31 million, respectively. The SHA anticipates a total increased cost of at least \$20 million, exclusive of the purchase and maintenance of additional equipment or possible increase in contracting unit prices.

During the summer of 2022, the MDOT launched a Statewide anti-litter campaign to educate Marylanders on the cost of litter, urging everyone to act with care and dispose of waste appropriately. During this time, the MDOT passed out litter bags to the public, and released educational videos on the impacts of litter on the environment and budget, as well as appropriate ways to dispose of garbage.

While the SHA utilizes critical partnerships with local jurisdictions and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) to help address highway litter removal, most litter removal and mowing activities are supported by contractors. Senate Bill 117 would require the SHA to contract with specific Maryland-based companies, giving preference to county-based companies that hire formerly incarcerated individuals. While the SHA supports the intent of this

The Honorable Melony Griffith  
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requirement, it could lead to unintended consequences making it more difficult for minority businesses to successfully bid.

This drastic increase in work volume could overwhelm the capabilities of small business contractors, particularly during current times of labor shortages and increased operating costs. To meet the requirements of this legislation SHA would need to expand the workforce and fleet of equipment, which would be challenging under current recruitment and supply chain challenges. For these reasons, this legislation would likely result in diverting resources from other maintenance activities, such as pavement patching, sign maintenance, and drainage.

In addition to the financial and operational limitations that result from the requirements of Senate Bill 117, there are environmental concerns to consider as it relates to the increased mowing frequencies. Several years ago, the SHA embarked on a reduced mowing program by returning selected areas of grassed roadsides to meadows and forests. Throughout this process, the SHA decreased the number of acres being mowed and the number of mowing cycles in a season, which created areas that benefit wildlife and improved water quality by capturing and containing runoff after storms. Additionally, the increased frequency of mowing with fossil fuel burning equipment will add harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Legislation passed in recent years requires a decrease of emissions to help meet aggressive State reduction goals. An increase in mowing frequency would be in direct conflict with these State goals.

For these reasons, the Maryland Department of Transportation respectfully requests the Committee grant Senate Bill 117 an unfavorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

Mitch Baldwin  
Acting Deputy Director  
Office of Policy & Legislative Services  
Maryland State Highway Administration  
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